

The Rolling Thunder Revue

At The Music Hall, Boston, Massachusetts, 11/21, 9 P.M.

BOB DYLAN, JOAN BAEZ, JONI MITCHELL, RONEE BLAKELY, ROGER McGUINN, RAMBLIN' JACK ELLIOTT, MICK RONSON & CO.

Boston (IS)—

By Gordy Bowman

Stoned to the bone, I sat up among the rafters of Ann Arbor's Crisler Arena and saw a distant speck rumored to be "Dylan." Echoing sounds were strongly reminiscent of certain songs I'd heard somewhere before. Amidst the strain of trying to pick out the various members of "The Band" and the man, I experienced the emotional phenomenon known as the slow burn. With most of the main floor seats getting scalped, I had been royally ripped-off.

Finally, a couple of years later, I've been royally repaid in spades by "The Jack of Hearts." "The Rolling Thunder Revue" is Dylan's vehicle of redemption in my eyes. It's doubtful that he'll extend this travelling-troupe concept beyond the Northeast, so I feel very fortunate to have been one of the lucky suckers to get a ticket. Don't despair. The continual presence of onstage movie cameras insures that the show will reach a mass audience.

Local reviews of the show mention "washed up relics of the Sixties," "commen," and wonder if Dylan can move forward from what is felt to be too narrow a view in his newer songs. The reviewers have been falling all over themselves to have the final word on this magical mystery tour. This tour effectively ducked the press by barring cameras and recorders and not even announcing ticket-sales until thirty minutes before they were to go on sale. This low-profile approach caught most people off-guard, and tickets were available for only two days.

Critics, who had already written their "Last Dylan Review," pulled out their old material and misfired, hitting the Dylan myth and missing the artistry of the actual performance. Because this was excellent music, executed in a remarkably tension-free atmosphere.

Only two tickets were sold to a customer and tickets were going for \$50 on the street the night of the show. A down-pour had ticket-holders heading to the Music Hall at a near gallop. Inside, a curtain proclaiming "The Rolling Thunder Revue" hung over the stage. When it was finally hoisted, an unfamiliar and unlikely-looking band took the stage. Guitarist Mick Ronson, an English rocker in the Jeff Beck mold, stood out among a collection of country rollers. Bob Neuwirth, a Dylanite from the Sixties, joined the basic band of Ronson, Steve Soles, T-Bone Burnette, Scarlet Rivera, Rob Stoner and a percussionist named Luther. Rivera's electric violin proved more than adequate at trading off with Ronson's leads. After one month of really playing together, they had become a really tight band. A few members of the band performed songs of their own and while some folks couldn't resist the urge to scream "we want Bobby," the audience had time to sit back and relax.

Band-leader Neuwirth confidently promised "a few surprises." The evening's first surprise walk-on was Ronee Blakely of "Nashville." She sang a couple of original songs and accompanied herself on piano and then, as she was leaving the stage, a rumor materialized in the person of Joni Mitchell, who drifted out by herself. The audience blew its top. She had joined up with the tour on Thursday night and hadn't worked anything out with the band. After two numbers, she vacated the spotlight, ignoring the carnivorous roar calling for her return. She had set the assembled hundreds off on their first full-blown

adrenalin-rush of the night.

Ramblin' Jack Elliott emerged dressed in cowboy chaps and crowned with a ten-gallon hat. The air was over-ripe with an air of anticipation. Roger McGuinn anonymously plucked out a little banjo accompaniment. Ramblin' Jack sagely added a humorous mood with a long talking-blues.

Dylan finally appeared at center stage. He was wearing a brown and white pinto-patterned shirt, black vest and on his head sat the hat he had worn in "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid." As he began an energetic "When I Paint My Masterpiece," I was struck by his pronounced and peculiar pallor. Wait a minute! His face was painted white. Was that really Dylan? I remembered "The Duke of Earl" recording from the "Masked Marauders" album. Who else could it be? Only one person could hammer out his phrases like that. Whatever was on that particular clown's mind, he wasn't clowning around. He was getting down.

He played a few oldies, making them sound better than ever. A reggae-laced beat to "It Ain't Me Babe" gave the tune a brand new shine. He began to talk to the audience.

"Sam Peckinpah," he called out. "Are you out there Sam? This is all I gotta say—Gooooood luck." His voice dripped thick with cynicism. He responded to a cry for a protest song—"This is a protest song." Later, he added, "This song is a true story... they're all true stories." He remained sphinx-like with his white-face as oceans of applause flooded the hall. "This is an autobiographical song," he said and with his harmonica between his hands he blew into "It Takes A Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry." The hardest rock of the night, this eerie old song was transformed into a supersonic twister.

The sheer power pushed the audience back in their seats. No one since Jimi Hendrix (died, has wielded such onstage presence. Dylan leapt and blew and rocked and stomped and before the

She sang "Do Right Woman" without accompaniment and brought down the proverbial house with "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down."

Roger McGuinn came out in a red velvet jacket with a bow-tie and sang "Chestnut Mare," which may or may not be alluded to on Dylan's scathing "Idiot Wind." Then in a truly well-timed move, the folksy atmosphere was blown out the tubes with a loose-as-a-goose playing of "Eight Miles High."

Dylan reemerged and it was clear that while he hadn't exactly removed his coat of white paint, he had managed to at least smear most of it off, leaving only lines of war paint. "Here's a good one for you," he announced as request upon request bounced up from the crowd. Whereupon he performed "Isis," a yet-to-be-released, powerful, driving, haunting in a minor-key way, hard-rocker about the Egyptian goddess.

Dylan soloed on "Tangled Up In Blue" and "I Don't Believe You." He kept running to get a drink, pawing about the stage like a big cat. He hunched down over the mike hesitantly, stalking the mike stand, looking like a moth zig-zagging towards a candle flame. His singular intensity was the cornerstone of the night. This was one of the few times a superstar would perform and an audience would be so sublimely satisfied.

He drove through "Just Like a Woman," "Oh, Sister," "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," and his new protest song—"Hurricane Carter." At one point he paused, "I want to dedicate this to my old friend Larry," he said. "Larry? You still out there? Not you Larry... the other Larry... you Larry." Are you kiddin'? No one had left. There was a river of communication flowing from the stage into the Hall. An umbilical cord of rapport had been established. How would it be cut? How else? The entire cast and a few extras took the stage for a hootenany version of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land," a novel thought lately, but it sounded real.

That's it, Dylan made it real. There were no hassles for the audience, except for one poor dude who lost his smoke to a security guard. The assembled entourage provided an excellent framework to highlight the true superstar. The mixed-up kid, coffee-house refugee, motorpsycho punk, Dylan has grown into the consummate songwriter/performer of our times. This Zimmerman fellow, the devil-driven artist of Anthony Scaduto's "Intimate Biography," still has the drive and the power and now he's shown that he means to use it and not lose it. His super-ego is finally held to earth and his reborn creativity is a gift to us all.

Walking from the Music Hall into the morning rain, I couldn't help but feel that, yes, under that outrageous hat that he wore all night was a true Mad Hatter, his madness firmly checked by the other side of a thin line bordering true genius. Slightly humbled by the experience, the audience went away without the myth, but with the man. That's a concert.



The Rolling Thunder Revue at the Howard Square Theatre in Boston

Photo: Timothy Carlson

vandals even beheld the handles, there were no more jams left to kick.

During the intermission, I wondered about the incongruity of Dylan's appearance and performance. His hat looked like it had a bunch of plastic carrots or some sort of dinner-table center-piece hanging on the band. And the white paint on his face? Was it an allusion to the Al Jolson-minstrel show era? A bad skin condition? A case of mistaken identity? A protective layer? Halloween? The return of the ghost rider? The jester? An addition for Mt. Rushmore? Prisoner in disguise? In any case, he was delivering the goods.

The audience was privileged to be on the receiving end of a tour which had been designed for maximum music and maximum mellowness instead of maximum money. The "Revue" had been conceived on a wine-drenched night in New York City, when Dylan began recruiting any and everyone he ran into. This impulsive desire to perform generated an almost amateur-night ambience at times. The sites were originally going to be intimate clubs; however it's obvious that small halls offered the golden mean between audience size and the quality of the music. Everyone in the theatre could hear and see and feel the performance. The stage was close enough so that a real sense of movement was obtained without circus elephants. It was obvious that the performers were really in the groove and this was only the half-way point.

When the lights dimmed, "Blowin' in the Wind" could be heard. The curtain stayed in place, but no one had to be told this was Dylan and Baez. And when the curtain began to rise, you could see these two old lovers leaning over a single mike. Joan sang with Bob in a way no one else can ever hope to equal. Their voices and styles, seemingly so disparate, flowed, lifted and ran together. Bob joined her for a few more numbers, including a memorable rendition of "I Shall Be Released," and then left Joan onstage. She sang "Diamonds and Rust," a song she had written about Bob—"Yes, I've loved you dearly and if you're offering me diamonds and rust, I've already paid." She responded to a cry for the Boston University song with the comment, "I was only at B.U. for about four days. All I learned was how to be Jewish if I had to." Then she broke into a snide version of the old Sam Cooke tune: "Don't know much about history, don't know much trigonometry..."

Gordy Bowman is an unemployed truckdriver residing in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He sent us this review of the Rolling Thunder Revue from somewhere on the east coast — much to our delight.